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Ribberink, J.C.A.P.

#### ***published in***

Toye, Richard and Julie Gottlieb , *Making Reputations. Power, Persuasion and the Individual in Modern British Politics*

2005

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

#### ***citation for published version (APA)***

Ribberink, J. C. A. P. (2005). " 'I don't think of myself as the first woman Prime Minister': Gender, Identity and Image in Margaret Thatcher's Career ' ". In *Toye, Richard and Julie Gottlieb , Making Reputations. Power, Persuasion and the Individual in Modern British Politics* IB Tauris.

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# Making Reputations

*Power, Persuasion and the  
Individual in Modern British Politics*

Edited by

Richard Toye and Julie Gottlieb

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON • NEW YORK

Published in 2005 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
www.ibtauris.com

In the United States of America and Canada distributed by  
Palgrave Macmillan a division of St. Martin's Press  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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International Library of Political Studies 5

ISBN 1 85043 841 2  
EAN 978 1 85043 841 0

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress catalog card: available

Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow,  
Cornwall

Camera-ready copy edited and supplied by the authors

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## ‘I don’t think of myself as the first woman Prime Minister’

Gender, Identity and Image in Margaret Thatcher’s  
Career<sup>1</sup>

*Anneke Ribberink*

The 15 December 1999, issue of the Dutch weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer* (‘The Green Amsterdammer’) includes a ‘hall of fame of strong women’. Alongside iconic women political figures such as the 18th-century Russian empress Catherine the Great, the former Dutch queen Wilhelmina, and the German revolutionaries Rosa Luxembourg and Ulrike Meinhof, stood the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of Thatcher on this ‘honour roll’ of powerful women throughout European history suggests that she not only made a significant impression on the history of her own country, but also on the history of gender and power more generally.

Of course, Thatcher’s legacy is not an entirely positive one. Indeed, many biographical studies of Thatcher’s and critical examinations of her political record and legacy adopt, at best, an ironic or sarcastic tone, and even more are decisively negative in their appraisal of her contribution to British politics and society. Irony and sarcasm permeate the aforementioned article in *De Groene Amsterdammer*, which states that Thatcher presented herself as the ‘nanny of the nation’ and that her electoral success can mostly be explained by the ‘boarding-school subconscious of the average Brit who yearns for a firm hand,’<sup>3</sup> expressing both common European stereotypes of Englishness, and the notion that Thatcher represented a strident but rear-guard version of female power that does not conform with feminist aspirations towards women’s empowerment *qua* women.

On the other hand, political commentators and historians have also voiced more positive assessments of the ‘iron lady’. The American political scientist Michael Genovese, for instance, points to the fact that Margaret Thatcher differs in two respects from other female world leaders to have emerged since 1945: she was not high-born, and her achievement was more impressive as a result. Although Thatcher’s origins were not proletarian, with her respectable lower-middle-class

origins, she did not have the support of a rich and powerful family to pave the way to her political success. In contrast, most other female national leaders were born ‘with a silver spoon in their mouth’, and, by dint of birthright, they were members of the ruling elites of their respective nations. Even among women leaders who were not born to privilege, such as Cory Aquino (Philippines), their access to leadership was due to a male ‘power behind the throne’, and their period of leadership was often colourless. (There is also, of course, the slightly different case of Eva Perón of Argentina, who, although holding no official position in her husband’s government, wielded enormous personal power.) The slight achievement of women leaders of this type tends to be accounted for by their sex, and the sexism they encountered.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the aforementioned ‘great women’ of the twentieth century, interpretations of Thatcher are noteworthy for their diversity and the decidedness of their judgement, both applauding and condemnatory. Therefore the looming figure of Margaret Thatcher begs a number of questions that will be examined in this chapter: what are the features of Thatcher’s biography that account for her course in politics and for the deep feelings of love or animosity that she excited in her contemporaries? Where does Thatcher’s story fit in the history of twentieth century European women’s history, especially as she herself rejected the feminist heritage as such? Was Thatcher a feminist in practice if not in ideology and belief, and what does her ‘practical feminism’ tell us about the gender order within the Conservative Party more specifically, and about British sexual politics more generally?

Thatcher was the longest serving incumbent British Prime Minister in the twentieth century, and she was in office for eleven and a half years (May 1979 to November 1990). She won three successive general elections, two with a large majority – a success unequalled by any other party leader in the twentieth century. Even if she had been a man, this would still have been a remarkable achievement for a leader of the Conservative Party, even during this notional ‘Conservative century’ of British history. But Margaret Thatcher is a woman, the first female British party leader, the first woman Prime Minister, and, in fact, the first female premier in a Western country. Gro Harlem Brundtland, who occupied a comparable position in Norway only took up office in 1981, and then only for a short period, and it was not until 1986 that she was to begin her second term of office.<sup>5</sup>

Does Thatcher deserve the accolade of ‘great’ because she was a woman who managed to rise to the top in a male-dominated society; because, born to the lower-middle-class, she was able to transcend her class origins in a class-bound society; or because she was an outstanding success as a politician and as Prime Minister? Thatcher herself, when commenting on her own performance during her three successive cabinets, has been far from modest. She is proud of having wrought

fundamental change in British society and elsewhere in the world, which she is convinced have been for the good. Her self-image, self-righteousness, conviction and undiminished national pride are all expressed in her autobiography. Of her government's achievements she says that they 'pioneered the new wave of economic freedom that was transforming countries from Eastern Europe to Australasia, which had restored Britain's reputation as a force to be reckoned with in the world.'<sup>6</sup>

Thatcher has actively contributed to the creation of her political image first, while in office, through attempts to control her media representations, and since by contributing to a burgeoning market in political apologia with her two-volume autobiography. This self-construction and controlled image runs along the following narrative lines: born in 1925, she was a dutiful daughter, who always had to work hard but could nonetheless look back on a happy childhood and youth. This was, above all, thanks to her father, Alfred Roberts, the owner of two grocer's shops in Grantham, Lincolnshire, and later the mayor of that town. Her father was the source of her interest in politics. The family was neither poor nor particularly prosperous. But Margaret was an apt pupil, did well at school, and was admitted to Somerville College at Oxford University to study chemistry, before turning to law. Through her marriage to the rich businessman Denis Thatcher, she gained financial freedom and could thus devote herself to politics, her great passion. Margaret and Denis had twins, a boy and a girl. Despite her career as a Conservative Party MP, Margaret was a good mother, and she has consistently maintained that family life was balanced, functional and happy.

During her political career, Margaret Thatcher became increasingly convinced that the Keynesian policy of consensus conducted by post-war governments was ruinous for the British economy and for British society. This policy was especially supported by Labour, but it was also supported by many Tories up to and including Ted Heath's administration. Going against party orthodoxy and the tradition of Conservative 'one nationalism', in the 1970s Thatcher became an adherent of monetarism, as advocated by the American economist Milton Friedman, and she became part of the group around the most prominent and vocal New Right intellectual, Keith Joseph. This group propagated ideas that would later be brought together under the umbrella term of 'Thatcherism', ideas that were very familiar to Margaret due to paternal influence and to her father's right-wing conservative inclinations. On the basis of this new direction, initially in a minority but gaining ever more supporters among the Conservatives, Thatcher was able to push through the necessary fundamental changes as Prime Minister and to save the country from disaster. An important principle for Thatcher throughout

her career has always been her father's adage that she should rely on her own judgment and not be afraid to adopt the position of an outsider.

All of these images emphasize that Thatcher was able to combine femininity with ruthlessness. Nor was this image uncultivated or accidental. Prefiguring the spin and image politics of the present day, on becoming Conservative Party leader Thatcher put herself in the hands of Gordon Reece, a former television producer, who engineered the manufacture of her image.

The hair was wrong, too suburban; it was restyled. The clothes were wrong, too fussy; they were replaced. The voice was wrong, too shrill; it was lowered in pitch through lessons from an expert in breathing. With singular dedication, Thatcher made herself into 'Maggie', the leader who is remembered, and she did so knowingly full well that she was not born to it, that it did not come naturally or easily.<sup>7</sup>

Her love of clothes is also legendary and she paid close attention to her wardrobe. To emphasize that she was one of the people, in an interview with the BBC she showed her favourite clothes, going as far to announce that she had bought her underwear at Marks & Spencer. There was a similar attention to detail and developing a media-friendly image in terms of speech writing, and Thatcher turned to others for expert help, employing the playwright Ronnie Millar as one of her chief speechwriters. Thus, alongside the transformation in political and economic thinking, we can see a shift in image and a careful responsiveness to the politics of celebrity. Essentially, the distinctiveness of Thatcherism was not only in terms of ideas and ideology, but also in terms of political technology and the manipulation of the media as the vehicle for Thatcher's populist messages. As Peter Clarke argues: 'Her purposeful projection of herself, moreover, was part of her populism - not to distance herself from those whom she often referred to as "our own people", but to represent them more effectively.'<sup>8</sup>

The above picture has been propagated, with variations, by Margaret Thatcher in her two volumes of autobiography, through many interviews with the media, and also in the - not entirely uncritical - biography of her husband written by her daughter Carol Thatcher. Carol quotes her father, who was proud of being married to 'one of the greatest women the world has ever produced.'<sup>9</sup>

To what extent is the self-created life narrative reflective of reality? And what is the meaning of this self-image? One can find an answer to these questions in the extensive historiography on Margaret Thatcher. Most of the literature has been produced by her compatriots, and a number of different approaches can be discerned. First there are the accounts written by male authors who mostly analyse her period in office

from a gender-neutral perspective. In other words, the fact that this was a female and not a male Prime Minister is hardly considered as fundamental to their analytical framework. However, this does not apply to the two best-known biographies, written by Hugo Young and John Campbell, who do apply a gender perspective.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the aforementioned political analyses do not present a uniformly negative picture. This is in contrast, however, to another body of literature, mostly written by (British) women, which is based on a gender perspective. Here it is generally concluded that Thatcher took an indifferent attitude to those of her own sex and that she was downright hostile to the feminist movement, which she regarded as part of the left-wing community that she so detested. Despite this, one can usually detect a degree of admiration for the way that Margaret Thatcher was able to use her sex appeal in politics, which strongly influenced her leadership style.<sup>11</sup>

John Campbell's biography draws attention to the great emphasis that Margaret Thatcher placed on image building. From the beginning of her period as Leader of the Opposition (1975-79), she was concerned with the way that she appeared to the public at large.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, according to Campbell, the way that she depicted her childhood and youth as warm and happy 'is in fact a supremely successful exercise in image management.'<sup>13</sup> It is indisputable that, in line with modern advertising models, a happy childhood was certainly beneficial to Thatcher's image and added lustre to her status as Prime Minister. Nonetheless, this part of Campbell's biography is not totally convincing. He may be correct when he notes that Margaret's upbringing was indeed very strict and ascetic, but this is exactly what she herself also recounted later: 'There wasn't a lot of fun and sparkle in my life.'<sup>14</sup> And it is certainly questionable whether she was as unhappy about this as Campbell suggests. He gives too little credit to the compensatory power of a father who gave her great encouragement and did everything to provide his youngest daughter with the education he had never enjoyed himself.<sup>15</sup>

Although having had a good childhood was important for the image of a successful Prime Minister, it was arguably even more important to have a good marriage and to be a good parent. Modern American presidents have good reason for devoting so much attention to the presentation of their family life in the media.<sup>16</sup> In this respect one should also consider Thatcher's political background as a member of the Conservative Party. Although until the 1980s Great Britain did not differ from other Western countries regarding the low number of female parliamentarians and the Conservative Party had always produced few female members of parliament, the party did have a long tradition of politically active women.<sup>17</sup> Since the Primrose League, the conservative organization formed at the end of the 19th century in order to mobilize popular support, women had been busy canvassing votes for the

Conservative Party and also helping the male party leadership in other ways, without, however, contesting its dominance. Following the attainment of women's suffrage at the end of the First World War,<sup>18</sup> the activities also included support for female parliamentary candidates. It is no coincidence that the first woman to take her seat as an MP in 1919, Lady Astor, was from the Tory Party. A Conservative female candidate for parliament did well to keep in mind this rank-and-file of politically aware women. In the 1950s and 1960s the Conservative women's association, the British Housewives League, had a strong voice in forming the part of the New Right ideology – later to become known as Thatcherism – that focussed on family and personal life. The core of these ideas was to be found in the idealization of the traditional family, accompanied in the 1960s by a rejection of the rising youth revolution and permissive society with its characteristic loose sexual morals. A happy full-time housewife and mother and a happy, harmonious childhood for the children completed the picture. Throughout her political career and her time as Prime Minister, Thatcher presented this model as an ideal – although it was at odds with her own reality as a paid working mother – and realized it in part by modelling her own family on a 'desirable conservative' pattern.

To what extent is Thatcher's harmonious image of her marriage and family based on reality? Regarding her marriage to Denis Thatcher, there is little reason to suppose that the truth has been distorted. There is enough 'objective' evidence that supports the subjective autobiographical sources, or at least does not disprove them. For one thing, the marriage enabled Margaret Thatcher to undertake law studies and to devote herself to a political career. Even more eloquent is the fact that Denis Thatcher, by then retired, was convincingly willing to take on the public role of male political consort once Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. In her biography of her father, Carol Thatcher does, however, suggest that he was not always happy about his wife being away from home so much due to her ministerial duties, but that can hardly be interpreted as a sign of a poor marriage – in fact on the contrary.<sup>19</sup>

Thatcher's relationship with her children is a different story. The twins grew up in the 1950s and 60s, the period before the women's liberation movement took flight and challenged the convention in sexual and gender politics and the myopia of the patriarchal state. As in the rest of the Western world, the traditional nuclear family was the desirable mode of living, with a male breadwinner and a woman whose primary responsibility was to keep the household and to raise the children.<sup>20</sup> And Denis Thatcher had a demanding job. Since the traditional breadwinner/housewife model formed an inalienable part of Thatcherism, Margaret Thatcher never completely managed to 'sell' her political career in combination with her role as mother. She continued to trumpet traditional full-time motherhood as the ideal – even when this

was increasingly at odds with the reality of British society in the 1980s – but always portrayed herself as an exception and as someone with an urge to ‘greatness’.<sup>21</sup> In her autobiography Thatcher writes about her emotional bond with her children, but also that she was nonetheless sure that she wanted a career in politics. The children were partly brought up by nannies and educated at boarding schools. According to Thatcher herself, the children wanted for nothing and they each had good relationships with their parents. As Thatcher put it:

I was especially fortunate in being able to rely on Denis’s income to hire a nanny to look after the children in my absences. I could combine being a good mother with being an effective professional woman, as long as I organized everything intelligently down to the last detail. It was not enough to have someone in to mind the children; I had to arrange my own time to ensure that I could spend a good deal of it with them.<sup>22</sup>

But this positive picture can be easily contested. Her daughter Carol is, in fact, rather critical, especially regarding the expenditure of family time when the twins were small. Both her parents, but above all her father, were often away from home. And there were hardly any family holidays in this period either, although this changed later. ‘Neither of my parents could be described as being natural or comfortable with young children.’<sup>23</sup> John Campbell goes a step further by claiming that Margaret Thatcher always put her career before her family. ‘What the young Thatchers missed was “normal” family life in the sense of the continuous presence of one or both parents [...] there was not much spontaneity or warmth in their upbringing.’<sup>24</sup>

There would be little point in condemning Thatcher for the way that she tried to combine her children with a political career. By now there is more than enough sociological and feminist literature to suggest that the pervasiveness of the ‘double burden’ experienced by modern women was not a mean thing. Not only were there few female MPs in the 1950s and 60s, in the United Kingdom as elsewhere in the Western world; but besides this, a large number of these women remained unmarried or only began a political career in later life when family obligations receded in importance. For most of them, the combination of parliamentary work and raising children was simply too difficult.<sup>25</sup> In this respect Thatcher was thus one of the exceptions, but she was in part able to take this position because she received support from other quarters.

One can, however, ask why Thatcher did not admit how difficult this combination of work and private life must have been for her too, even though others helped her. It is not enough to say that she preferred to avoid the subject because it was a sensitive one in right-wing conservative circles. An explanation can also be found in the importance

she attached to a good presentation of herself in the media. A toiling housewife and mother seemed less sound and reliable than someone who created the impression that it was easy to juggle the demands of work inside and outside the home: better to be a ‘superwoman’ than a household drudge. Carol Thatcher had good reason for using the description ‘superwoman’ for her mother, and she writes: ‘Somehow she juggled working, studying, organizing the household, shopping, cooking, sewing, ironing and liaising with nanny.’<sup>26</sup>

It is not the most insignificant of the authors surveying Thatcher’s period as Prime Minister who concludes his account with the following words: ‘Her impact while in office was less only than that of Lloyd George and Churchill. Perhaps she was even their equal in this.’<sup>27</sup> This is at least close to a description of a ‘great’ politician. Peter Hennessy points to several elements of Margaret Thatcher’s enduring legacy that are also mentioned in other examinations of her period in power. He cites the fact that she broke the power of the trade union movement and that the boundary between the public and private realms was fundamentally shifted. Furthermore, Hennessy mentions the increase in the number of shareholders from three million in 1979 to nine million in 1989 and also the sale of a million council flats to private persons on favourable conditions, ‘a substantial shift towards that long-standing Conservative ideal of a “property owning democracy.”’<sup>28</sup>

Is it thus true that Thatcher saved the country from ruin in the 1980s, as she herself claims? This is certainly debatable. To begin with, one can qualify this legacy in various ways. Thatcher indisputably gave the trade union movement the *coup de grace* with her restrictive legislation against the right to strike and the principle of the closed shop, and certainly with the successful end to the miners’ strike of 1984–85. She was supported in her victory, however, by the fact that the trade union movement already had been on the defensive since the early 1980s, due to the blows it received from the economic crisis.<sup>29</sup> Further, the ideal of the ‘property owning democracy’ is less impressive on closer examination. This brought benefits mainly to a specific group in British society, the social layer of skilled workers, petit bourgeois and higher up the social ladder. In this context one should also point to ‘Thatcher’s children’, the yuppies who were able to undertake successful careers in the 1980s thanks in part to the stimulation of the services sector and of new ‘creative’ industries such as pop music, fashion, hi-tech and software.<sup>30</sup> Old industries, such as the textiles sector, disappeared as a result of the strict monetary policies applied during Thatcher’s first cabinet period (1979–83). This led to high unemployment – in the mid-1980s there were 3.5 million unemployed in Britain – and a widening of the gulf between rich and poor. The ghettos in the large cities were a sad monument to a policy that claimed many victims, especially in the lower social levels of society.<sup>31</sup>

This does not detract from the fact that Thatcher managed to halt, at least for a while, the economic decline of the 1970s and above all the feared spectre of inflation – even though there were signs of a new recession during her last cabinet (1987–1990). The literature devotes a great deal of attention to the socio-economic dimension of Thatcherism, and in this context the word ‘revolution’ is frequently used to describe the enormity of socio-economic change.<sup>32</sup> This term seems incorrect insofar as ‘revolution’ refers to a unique event. The policies applied under Thatcher were part of an international trend, and one that included Reaganomics in the United States and Lubberism in the Netherlands.<sup>33</sup> One can, however, claim that Thatcher was among the pioneers of monetarism and privatization. With the reference to privatization, Kenneth Morgan writes: ‘It chimed in with a mood of *anti-étatisme* in many countries, notably in France where the Chirac government used the Thatcher policy as a model in its privatization of state banks and other enterprises in 1984–6.’<sup>34</sup>

The effects of these policies were more spectacular in Great Britain than elsewhere because in the 1970s Britain was experiencing an acute socio-economic crisis in comparison to other European countries. As Hennessy comments: no ‘other Prime Minister (except perhaps Nigel Lawson had he made it to No. 10) would have pushed these policies so far, so firmly or so swiftly.’<sup>35</sup> Perhaps ‘revolution’ is too strong a term, but Thatcher’s policies did leave a lasting mark in the socio-economic sphere. The legacy of Margaret Thatcher can be recognized, for instance, in the introduction of the ‘Third Way’ by the Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair on taking up office in 1997. This partnership between the private and public sector forms a radical break with the Labour Party’s past, and it was catalysed by Thatcher’s ‘conviction’ politics, if not by her ‘revolutionary’ policies.<sup>36</sup>

Thatcherite policies are also much discussed by feminist critics, and an important aspect here is Thatcher’s own gender identity. The verdict is far from positive: Thatcher showed no solidarity or sorority whatsoever with other women who shared political aspirations. An important element of Thatcherism was family policy. The traditional breadwinner/housewife family was propagated as the ideal and used as a bastion against the moral degeneracy that was, supposedly, a consequence of innovations in the fields of sexuality and modes of cohabitation since the 1960s.<sup>37</sup> In the process, Thatcher ignored every criticism made by the modern feminist movement of the traditional family as a repressive institution that maintained women’s dependence on men.

Moreover, this imperative norm was now completely out of step with reality. Aside from the fact that Thatcher herself had always been a paid working mother, the number of paid working mothers in general had consistently risen since World War II. This process continued in the

1980s as well: while in 1983 around 23 per cent of mothers with children aged under five in Great Britain carried out paid work, by 1990 this percentage had already increased to 41 per cent.<sup>38</sup> Under Thatcher the traditional family also served as a mechanism against excessive state influence and was thus an instrument in the policies of privatization and deregulation and in austerity policies. The increasing number of families with a single parent (most often mothers) was hit particularly hard by the freezing of child benefits by the government and cuts in child-care facilities. This latter development was conducted under the motto that the decision to do paid work was a private matter, which did not need to be subsidized by the state. While in 1945 some 62,000 child-care places were funded by the state, by 1983 this figure had fallen to just 29,000.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, as Prime Minister, Thatcher made no attempt to promote the careers of other women. On the contrary, she sometimes even worked against the interests of women. Thatcher owes her successful career in part to the achievements of the women’s movement, which pressed for an increase in the number of female politicians, but she never acknowledged this. She always claimed that she owed her success to her own performance and personal qualities, and, correspondingly, adopted the position of the infamous ‘queen bee’ who denies that women are faced with discriminatory practices when climbing the social and political ladder.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, one can qualify this justified criticism by feminist writers. Was Thatcher’s lack of solidarity with her own sex and her refusal to acknowledge that her gender either produced advantages for her or stood in the way of her career, not also prompted by the fear of seeming weak? Thatcher needed to hold her own in a male world and female politicians were in danger of not being taken seriously by their male counterparts.<sup>41</sup> The Henigs, a British couple who have written a book on women and political power, comment as follows on how a British female member of parliament needed to behave in the 1960s: ‘To be successful, and to make their mark in such a male-dominated environment, women had to compete with men on their terms and be tough.’<sup>42</sup> Being tough meant, among other things, that one had no wish to be identified with ‘women’s subjects,’ such as health, social work and legislative emancipation. In the course of her political career, Thatcher always sought to concentrate on ‘hard men’s subjects’ such as finance and the economy.<sup>43</sup> As Prime Minister she increasingly became her ‘own’ Foreign Secretary. And few disputed her knowledge in these areas. Her fear of being understood as a woman in a man’s world was also revealed in her remark, made when taking up office as Prime Minister: ‘I don’t think of myself as the first woman Prime Minister.’<sup>44</sup> Someone who expresses herself in this way cannot immediately be expected to act as a ‘feminist’ by promoting the careers of other women.



Significantly, this is actually what happened, however unintentionally. Martin Pugh points out that Margaret Thatcher functioned as a role model. Through her political achievements she put a definitive end to the widely held view that women could not be skilled politicians. In the Britain of the 1990s a number of women were appointed to high positions, amongst others in the sphere of justice, the House of Commons and at newspaper publishers, profiting from Thatcher's shattering of the 'glass ceiling'. Another unintentional effect of Thatcher's position as Prime Minister was that the stimulation of the services sector under her administration created a large number of jobs for women, not least because these were often part-time jobs that were particularly attractive to women.<sup>45</sup>

Much has been written about Margaret Thatcher's demeanour and actions, from both gender-neutral and gender-specific perspectives. The term Thatcherism is also taken to include her militant, aggressive and authoritarian bearing as Prime Minister.<sup>46</sup> According to Peter Hennessy this 'very personal style of government', in which an 'over-mighty Prime Minister' dominated the cabinet, really took shape after the victory in the Falklands War in early 1982 when her popularity increased dramatically.<sup>47</sup> He objects to the way that Thatcher's ministers are often depicted as simply being victims of her dictatorial tendencies and refers to a comment by the Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson. According to Lawson, the longer-serving ministers often found it easier not to participate in endless consultations with fellow ministers and instead to make a private deal with the Prime Minister.<sup>48</sup> However, ultimately, her leadership style, in combination with her resistance to further European unification, proved to be her undoing. But it is typical that this only happened towards the end of her third term of office (1987-90) when things were already going less well, especially in economic terms. In particular the resignation of two of her most loyal ministers, Nigel Lawson and Geoffrey Howe, heralded the beginning of the end for Thatcher and the last days of her premiership came within sight.

There is much debate as to whether Margaret Thatcher really was a political outsider, or whether she exploited this status as part of her media image. John Campbell and Peter Hennessy believe the latter. In Campbell's view, the way that Thatcher used her lower-middle-class origins to underline her position as an outsider amid the upper-class aristocrats who made up a large part of the Tory Party was rather exaggerated. Before becoming leader of the Conservatives in 1975 she had already been married to a rich husband for twenty-four years, and had thus long ago transcended her humble birth.<sup>49</sup> Hugo Young and Kenneth Morgan, in contrast, believe that her social background did indeed make a difference. Young regards Thatcher's aggressive leadership style as a way of disguising her insecurity due to her origins

and her sex. Morgan sees her provincial bourgeois background as decisive for her later espousal of the ideology of neo-liberalism and her focus on successful business people – whose careers she liked to promote – instead of intellectuals, whom she described collectively as the 'chattering classes'.<sup>50</sup>

In my view the truth lies in the middle – both perspectives are useful. There is no doubt that the media image of the underdog further amplifying her status as a self-made woman, and it suited Margaret Thatcher well. On the other hand, there are enough indications that, as *nouveau-riche*, she was not in fact fully accepted by the members of the true upper class in her party. In the early 1980s, Defence Secretary Francis Pym spoke not only for himself when he argued 'that the real problem for the Tories was that 'we've got a corporal at the top, not a cavalry officer.'<sup>51</sup> One can assume, however, that the confronting, uncompromising way Margaret Thatcher behaved added to her isolated position. Her predecessor as Leader of the Party and Prime Minister, Ted Heath, who was from a similar social background to Thatcher, had less difficulty being accepted by the Tories, but was much more prepared to compromise than she was.<sup>52</sup> And he was a man.

There is no doubt that Thatcher's gender made her an outsider in high politics, as underlined by Hugo Young. And it was precisely here that she gave the least ground to others, probably due to the aforementioned fear of being seen as 'weak' and 'feminist', the latter a term of abuse in Right-wing circles. All her cabinets had exclusively male ministers, thus even further emphasising the gender of the Prime Minister.<sup>53</sup> The fact that Thatcher did not openly cite her gender as a determining factor in the political game does not mean that she did not exploit her status as a woman: this is just what she did, but in a much more round-about fashion. Her leadership style was marked not only by aggressiveness and dominance but also by a high degree of skill in switching between male and female roles: Thatcher was an expert 'gender-bender'. She could seem masculine and instil fear through her aggressive and iron-ladylike behaviour. In this way she confounded her (male) colleagues, who were not sure how to react to this precisely because she was a woman. Nor did Thatcher hesitate to make use of their confusion. On the other hand, she also played the female card by using her charms when necessary. Eric Evans quotes one of Thatcher's advisors, a Hungarian emigrant, on her personality as a woman: 'He believes that her "perplexing charm" enabled her to be "getting away with" political ploys and stratagems which a man would not.'<sup>54</sup>

John Campbell writes that Thatcher used her gender in an extremely clever way in the political game:

She was able to tap into a range of female types: established role models of women in positions of authority whom men were used

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to obeying. Thus she was the Teacher, patiently but with absolute certainty explaining the answers to the nation's problems: and the Headmistress exhorting the electorate to pull its socks up. She was Doctor Thatcher, or sometimes Nurse Thatcher, prescribing nasty medicine or a strict diet that the voters knew in their hearts would be good for them. Or she was the nation's Nanny, with overtones of discipline, fresh air and regular bowel movements' to get the country going [...] Finally she was Britannia, the feminine embodiment of patriotism, wrapping herself unselfconsciously in the Union Jack. No politician since Churchill had appealed so emotionally to British nationalism.<sup>55</sup>

Campbell also points to the way that Margaret Thatcher used the role of housewife and a domesticated language in her political and media campaigns. This is a theme much discussed by feminist authors. One of Thatcher's favourite ploys was to compare the national economy with a household purse that needed to be managed through sensible policies, i.e. by 'Thatcher the housewife'. Moreover she was often depicted standing in the kitchen or with a shopping bag in her hand.<sup>56</sup> Beatrix Campbell notes that this housewife act was transparent – partly because Thatcher herself was not a real housewife – but Campbell can also admit that this self-created image functioned as an effective ploy. It is pointed out that Thatcher was supreme in her ability to set out complex matters in simple words.<sup>57</sup>

The successes and failures of the gendered image that Thatcher attempted to project can be seen in her popularity with the electorate, and especially with women voters. In the mid-1980s Margaret Thatcher was at the peak of her popularity with the electorate, although the Conservatives never gained more than 43.9 per cent of the popular vote under her leadership and thus failed to equal Labour in its golden period around 1950. Moreover, the Tory victories of 1983 and 1987 certainly owed much to the weakness of the opposition.<sup>58</sup> Under Thatcher there was a halt to the post-war trend of more women than men voting for the Conservatives. Thatcher scored low with young women especially, whereas middle-aged women were relatively well represented among Conservative voters. This could indicate that Thatcherite family policies and the promotion of a conservative view of women were quite popular with this category of older women, but in fact failed to impress younger women.<sup>59</sup>

A desire to appear as a 'superwoman', and to be someone who had things under control no matter what, was the winning formula of Margaret Thatcher's leadership style. Both Hugo Young and Peter Hennessy<sup>60</sup> have pointed out that under her aggressive and seemingly tough exterior Margaret Thatcher was actually an insecure and hypersensitive woman. She refused to label herself as the 'first woman

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Prime Minister' but she was clearly very aware of her sex, as demonstrated by the way that she used her feminine status in the media and in political practice. The way that she tried to maintain her perfect image can be explained by her strong awareness that she, as the first woman in such a position, was in great danger of being shot down. She was a much more vulnerable outsider due to her gender than due to her origins in the provincial bourgeoisie, even though this latter aspect is important too. Her 'queen bee' behaviour and lack of solidarity with other women can be explained in this light.

What is the reality of Margaret Thatcher? The image she created of her childhood and marriage are reasonably faithful to the truth. As a mother, however, she 'failed' much more than she was later prepared to admit. Her children paid a high price for her career, in the form of a mother who had little time for them. But one should ask whether anything else was possible under the circumstances. Thatcher was not a 'great' Prime Minister if we understand 'great' as an unconditionally positive adjective: her policies brought too many disadvantages, in particular the increase of social inequality and the creation, in rhetoric as much as in reality, of an 'underclass'.

The supposed uniqueness of Thatcherism can be strongly qualified by pointing to the international and time-bound nature of Thatcher's socio-economic policy. She was, however, a Prime Minister of vision and conviction, and one who was also prepared to take responsibility for the less pleasant consequences of the indisputably major changes that she brought about. The paradox is that the woman who above all did not want to be seen as a *female* Prime Minister is important precisely in this respect. Through her impressive, albeit controversial, performance Margaret Thatcher showed what women are able to achieve in politics and thus unintentionally caused a major breakthrough in women's political history. There are many who leave a less impressive legacy.

- <sup>60</sup> Foot: *Loyalists and Loners*, p. 119. Foot memorably described how - in his view - Cripps in the 1930s had 'declared the class war without ever having studied the contours of the battlefield': Foot: *Bevan* vol. I, p. 156.
- <sup>61</sup> Foot draft for *The Guardian*, 10 September 1981, Foot papers, MF/L14; *The Guardian*, 10 September 1981.
- <sup>62</sup> TUCAR, 1981, p. 474.
- <sup>63</sup> Morgan: *Labour People*, p. 286.
- <sup>64</sup> LPACR, 1981, p. 118.
- <sup>65</sup> Jones: *Foot*, pp. 476-7; Benn diary, 10 November 1981 in Benn: *End of an Era*, p. 166.
- <sup>66</sup> For Foot's criticism of the show trials in the late 1950s (and his regret at not speaking out in the 1930s) see Foot, M., 'The road to ruin' in Thomas, E. (ed), *Tribune 21* (London, 1958), pp. 7-8. His stance is analysed more fully in Corthorn, P., 'Labour, the Left, and the Stalinist Purges of the late 1930s', *Historical Journal*, forthcoming.
- <sup>67</sup> Foot, M., 'My Kind of Party', *The Observer*, 17 January 1982, Foot papers, MF/L14.
- <sup>68</sup> Thorpe: *British Labour Party*, pp. 208-9.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 210; Shaw, 'Foot', p. 163-4.
- <sup>70</sup> See, for instance, Shaw, 'Foot', pp. 162-4.
- <sup>71</sup> Transcript of Foot interview with Brian Walden, 'Weekend World, 3 October 1982', 'After the Conference ... on the road to power', 2/18, Foot papers, MF/L14.
- <sup>72</sup> LPACR, 1982, p. 52.
- <sup>73</sup> Foot, *Another Heart*, p. 168.
- <sup>74</sup> For the early influence of Bevan on Kinnock see Westlake, M., *Kinnock: the biography* (London, 2001), pp. 25-7, 40.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid, pp. 62-3. See also Kinnock's approving references to Bevan: Kinnock, N., *Making Our Way* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 7, 95, 195.
- <sup>76</sup> LPACR, 1983, p. 116.
- <sup>77</sup> The broader point this raises relates to Cripps's problematic reputation in general. Clarke, P., *The Cripps Version: the life of Sir Stafford Cripps* (London, 2002), pp. xiii-xiv, comments that while 'subsequent advocates of moderation' have found 'Cripps's well-publicised posturings [in the 1930s] ... silly', on the other hand 'socialists sympathetic to the pre-war Cripps, the founder of *Tribune*, have tended to deplore his later apostasy. The *Tribune* group were to be identified as Bevanites, but there were no Crippsites in the post-war Labour party'.
- <sup>78</sup> Lawrence, J., 'Labour - the myths it has lived by', in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 341-366, esp. p. 357.
- <sup>79</sup> Foot: *Another Heart*, pp. 115-16.

#### Chapter 12. Thatcher and Gender.

<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to the editors of this volume and especially to Dr. Julle Gottlieb: my chapter has profited a great deal from her comments and assistance. Furthermore I would like to thank my American colleague at the Free University Dr. Markha Valenta, who gave me good advice on the use of several English expressions.

- <sup>2</sup> 'Groene-eregalen van sterke vrouwen', *De Groene Amsterdammer* (15 December 1999), pp. 36-37.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1
- <sup>4</sup> Genovese, Michael, 'Women as national leaders. What do we know?', in Michael Genovese (ed), *Women as National Leaders: Political Performance of Women as Heads of Government* (London, 1993), pp. 211-218.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 211-218, q.v. p. 212.
- <sup>6</sup> Thatcher, Margaret, *The Downing Street Years* (2nd edition, London, 1995), p. 860. See also Evans, Eric, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (London, 1997), p. 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Clarke, Peter, 'The Rise and Fall of Thatcherism', *London Review of Books*, 10 December 1998.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Thatcher: *Downing Street Years*; Thatcher, Margaret, *The Path to Power* (London, 1995). Thatcher, Carol, *Below the Parapet. The biography of Denis Thatcher* (London, 1996), p. 290.
- <sup>10</sup> Campbell, John, *Margaret Thatcher, vol. 1: the Grocer's daughter* (London, 2000), and vol. 2: *Iron Lady* (London, 2003). Young, Hugo, *One of us. A biography of Margaret Thatcher* (3rd edition, London, 1993).
- <sup>11</sup> See for example Campbell, Beatrix, *The Iron Ladies: Why do women vote Tory?* (London, 1987); Pilcher, Jane, 'The Gender Significance of Women in Power: British Women Talking about Margaret Thatcher', *The European Journal of Women's Studies* (November 1995), pp. 493-508; and Lewis, Jane *Women in Britain since 1945: Women, Family, Work and the State in the Post-War Years* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1994).
- <sup>12</sup> Campbell: *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, p. 402 ff. London, Nick, *Prime Minister Maggie*, television broadcast, Dutch Television, 23 September 2003.
- <sup>13</sup> Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, p. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Margaret Thatcher in 1980, quoted in London: *Prime Minister Maggie*.
- <sup>15</sup> Campbell: *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, Chapter 1; London: *Prime Minister Maggie*.
- <sup>16</sup> Knapen, Ben, 'Het land van de kwaaddoeners: Karel van Wolferens aanklacht tegen George Bush en de neo-conservatieven', *NRC Handelsblad*, 12 September 2003.
- <sup>17</sup> Campbell: *The Iron Ladies*, q.v. p. 251. Between the introduction of women's suffrage in 1918 and the end of the 1970s the proportion of female MPs never exceeded 5 per cent. For a comparison with other Western countries see Leijenaar, Monique, *De geschiede heerlijkheid. Politiek gedrag van vrouwen en mannen in Nederland, 1918-1988* (The Hague, 1989), p. 244.
- <sup>18</sup> This was a limited women's suffrage. General women's suffrage was not achieved in Great Britain until 1928.
- <sup>19</sup> Thatcher: *Below the Parapet*, *passim*, but especially pp. 112, 113, 153, 162, 289.
- <sup>20</sup> Lewis: *Women in Britain since 1945*, pp. 10-26.
- <sup>21</sup> Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*, p. 238; Pilcher, 'The Gender Significance', p. 495.
- <sup>22</sup> Thatcher: *Path to Power*, pp. 81, 82.
- <sup>23</sup> Thatcher: *Below the Parapet*, p. 71.
- <sup>24</sup> Campbell: *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 1, p. 105 ff.
- <sup>25</sup> Vallence, Elisabeth, *Women in the House: A study of Women members of Parliament* (London, 1979); Leijenaar, Monique and Saharso, Sawriti, *Vrouwen en politieke macht. Trendrapport over vrouwenstudies en emancipatie-onderzoek op het gebied van vrouwen en politieke macht* (The Hague, 1983), pp. 60-62; Linders, Anneke, *Trappez, frappez*